

The mammogram experience

By Melanie Casey

Editor

I knew it was coming. I turned 40 this year, the magic year — so dictated by the American Cancer Society — that I should get my first mammogram.

When my doctor mentioned the screening to me during my annual “well-woman” exam at Kimbrough Ambulatory Care Center this summer, I was expecting it.

I guess it’s an indoctrination of sorts into — dare I say it — middle age. This mammogram would be important because, as my first, it will serve as a “baseline,” from which doctors will compare my later mammograms to.

A mammogram is just a screening tool, like a pap smear is for cervical cancer. Neither can say decisively that a woman has cancer, just that further study is needed.

October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month — but, many women are still reluctant to think about it. It’s not so much the mammogram test that some women are afraid of — it’s pretty simple, actually — it’s the potential behind it. It’s too scary, too real. Some women won’t get a mammogram because of this fear.

However, according to the American Cancer Society, only about two to four mammograms in every 1,000 will lead to a cancer diagnosis. And though not perfect, mammograms can find breast cancer early — well before a tumor can be felt on a self-exam.

My mammogram at Kimbrough was routine. The whole procedure took about 15 minutes from start to finish — including stripping from the waist up, donning an oh-so-attractive cape, having the procedure and getting dressed again.

A mammogram is an X-ray. The big difference between getting an X-ray of, say, your ankle and a mammogram is that your ankle is not stretched out and then compressed between two plates of glass. That sounds worse than it is, believe me. My mammogram didn’t hurt; actually, it wasn’t even really uncomfortable. Kind of strange, to be sure, but not uncomfortable.

Each breast is done individually, while standing. The mammography technician helps position both the machine and the breasts to ensure the best picture. The breast is compressed for a few seconds while the X-ray is taken, then it’s on to the other side.

About 90 percent of mammograms come back fine. The remaining 10 percent most often just need another mammogram, and only a few of those will require further study. I happened to fall into the other 10 percent.

A few days after my first mammogram, my doctor called and told me I needed another screening on one side “for further evaluation.” Was I scared? You bet. But I didn’t panic. I knew that if something was wrong, we had found it early. Turns out it was nothing — as the majority of follow-up tests are.

Bottom line — the test is simple, it’s painless and it can save your life. If you’re 40 and haven’t yet had a mammogram, what are you waiting for?

KACC beneficiaries can schedule a mammogram by calling 301-677-8321.